

Drugs, Alcohol and Your Teen

The temptation to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes and take drugs is common among teenagers. They may be looking to experiment or be influenced by their peers. Often they don't realize how severe the risks are to themselves and others. It is your responsibility as a parent to talk to your child openly about the dangers of drug and alcohol use, to set proper boundaries and to seek professional help if there's a problem.

A Difficult Age

Beginning as early as elementary school, your child may be tempted to drink a beer, smoke cigarettes, try marijuana or experiment with other drugs. While many kids never experiment with drugs, the mystique and appeal of these substances can grow during the teenage years. Parents who refuse to believe that their children would succumb to such pressures are kidding themselves. Statistics show that the potential exists no matter how good a parent you are. Understanding why teenagers are willing to risk the serious consequences of drug and alcohol use requires an awareness of what makes these substances attractive to teens. Common factors that can lead to drug and alcohol use include:

- Peer pressure: Peers can be as big an influence as parents during these years;
- Hereditary predisposition to drug or alcohol addiction: An alcoholic or addict in the family greatly increases the tendency to abuse drugs or alcohol; and
- Emotional issues: Depression; physical, sexual or emotional abuse; low self-esteem; and learning, emotional or family problems all can contribute to substance abuse.

The Warning Signs

Do not expect your teen to come to you and admit to taking drugs, drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. It is your job to watch for warning signs and symptoms of a problem and to get professional help if you suspect that your child may be at risk. Here are some tips:

- Get to know your teen's friends. The crowd with whom he or she spends time may tell you a lot about his or her behavior and potential to get into trouble. Trust your instincts, and talk calmly but honestly with your teen if you feel his or her choice of friends is problematic.
- Closely monitor your teen's grades. If you notice his or her marks slipping, look into the matter. Poor grades can be a sign of drug or alcohol use.
- Watch for your teen dropping out of life. If he or she has quit activities like a school sport or after-school club and begins to skip classes, family outings or church, this may indicate drug or alcohol use.
- Pay attention to strange behaviors. If your teen begins to lie; experiences sudden mood swings; becomes withdrawn, antisocial, listless, and apathetic; shows little regard for appearance and clothing; or behaves violently and disruptively, drugs or alcohol may be the cause. Attempts to bar you from his or her bedroom and more regular requests for money also may indicate a problem.
- Look for tangible proof. Alcohol or smoke on your teen's breath is an obvious clue. If you suspect a serious problem, experts advise searching your teen's room for alcohol and drug paraphernalia to confirm your suspicions. Remember that legally you may be responsible for your teenager's actions and behavior.
- Realize that one addiction can lead to another. Studies show that your teen's smoking or drinking habit possibly can tempt him or her to try other drugs such as cocaine, heroin and amphetamines.

Talking to Your Teen

Today, even elementary schools are teaching kids about the consequences of drug use. Experts recommend that the earlier parents talk to their children about alcohol and drug use the better chance they have of getting them to listen and adopt their values. If you wait until he or she reaches adolescence before first discussing this topic, you may have a harder time getting through to your child. The best time to prevent drug use is before it begins.

Though you may want to sit down with your teen right away and get to the heart of the matter, try a more subtle approach. Look for a natural opportunity to talk with your teen and introduce the topic into the conversation: perhaps during a drive together in the car, after watching a TV movie or after a family dinner. Be sure the other parent agrees with your approach to the discussion and is also available to talk. Experts recommend against having a heart-to-heart when you suspect your teen is actually under the influence.

When attempting to talk to your child about drugs or any other serious topic, adopt the voice of a friend, not a lecturing parent. Ask your adolescent how life has been going. Does he or she have any concerns at school? Learn to listen carefully to what he or she says and identify problem areas. Establish comfortable, open lines of communication by reassuring your child that he or she doesn't have to be afraid to talk to you about anything. You want your teen to confide in you with his or her problems. Make your teen feel understood and supported.

However, don't expect your child to admit outright that he or she is using drugs, drinking alcohol or smoking. Teenagers often find it difficult to share their concerns with parents due to fear of misunderstanding, punishment and rejection. During your talk, your teen may be evasive, defensive and non-communicative. Avoid making accusations and overreacting. Remain calm. Approach your child directly but gently: "Your father and I are a little worried about you lately. We've noticed changes in your behavior and attitude. Is anything bothering you? Can you tell us about it?"

If your teen admits to using drugs or alcohol, aim toward achieving five goals:

1. Show that you care about your teen's safety and well-being. Arrange for a professional substance-abuse evaluation if you have serious concerns.
2. Reinforce that taking drugs and alcohol is dangerous and illegal and that the consequences aren't worth the risks. Educate your teen with sobering facts (e.g., the leading cause of death among young people is drinking and driving, etc.).
3. Stress your values and expectations. Indicate that drug and alcohol use will not be tolerated (especially drinking and driving). Reassure your teen that it is always okay to admit that he or she has a problem and that you'll seek help together, as a family. Urge your child not to drive or let friends drive while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
4. Establish rules and incentives. Ask your teen what would be an appropriate penalty for drinking or smoking (e.g., no use of the car for a month, no allowance for five weeks, etc.). However, be careful when setting rules. If your approach is too strict, your teen simply may look for ways to get around being caught. Consider giving incentives for staying smoke, drink and drug free.
5. Be a positive role model. Set a good example by not abusing drugs or alcohol yourself. Vow to quit a habit like smoking and curtail your own drinking to demonstrate responsible behavior to your teen.

You can't monitor your teen 24 hours a day. Trust him or her to make the right decisions. Strive to be a good listener, an advocate and a responsible, caring parent, not a punishing authoritarian. Continue to work on improving your relationship with your teen and on clearing the channels of communication.

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